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THE SONG OF THE INNUIT[1]

BY WILLIAM H. DALL

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
  Who scatter about the floe
And watch for the puff of the breathing seal,
  While the whistling breezes blow.
By a silent stroke the ice is broke,
  And the struggling prey below,
With the crimson flood of its spouting blood
  Reddens the level snow.

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
  Who flock to the broken rim
Of the Arctic pack where the walrus lie
  In the polar twilight dim.
Far from the shore their surly roar
  Rises above the whirl
Of the eager wave, as the Innuit brave
  Their flying lances hurl.

[1] Innuit is the name by which the Eskimo calls himself and his people from Greenland to Mount St. Elias. The topek is the winter house of turf and walrus hide, as contrasted with the igloo or snow-house, used where there is no wood. All Innuit believe in evil spirits which dwell inland from the shores: in Greenland they are supposed to inhabit the Nunataks or peaks which rise like islands out of the bosom of the glaciers. In times of starvation Innuit ethics allow a mother to expose an infant, for whom she cannot supply food, in the snow to die. The child's mouth is usually stuffed with grass, as otherwise its spirit would return and be heard crying about the house at night.

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Oh, we are the Innuit people,
  Who lie in the topek warm;
While the northern blast flies strong and fast,
  And fiercely roars the storm;

Recounting the ancient legends,
  Of fighting, hunting, and play,
When our ancestors came from the southland tame,
  To the glorious Arctic day.

There is one sits by in silence,
  With terror in her eyes:
For she hears in dreams the piteous
    screams
  Of a cast-out babe that dies —
Dies in the snow as the keen winds
    blow,
  And the shrieking northers come
Of that dreadful day when she starv-
    ing lay,
  Alone in her empty home.

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
And we lie secure and warm,
Where the ghostly folk of the Nunatak
Can never do us harm.
Under the stretching walrus-hide,
Where at the evening meal
The well-filled bowl cheers every soul,
Heaped high with steaming seal.

The Awful Folk of the Nunatak
Come down in the hail and snow,
And slash the skin of the kayak thin,
To work the hunter woe.
They steal the fish from the next day's dish,
And rot the walrus lines —
But they fade away with the dawning day,
As the light of summer shines.

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
Of the long, bright Arctic day:
When the whalers come and the poppies bloom,
And the ice-floe shrinks away:
Afar in the buoyant umiak,
We feather our paddle blades,
And laugh in the light of the sunshine bright,
Where the White Man's schooner trades.

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
Rosy and brown and gay;

And we shout as we sing at the wrestling ring,
Or toss the ball at play.
In frolic chase we oft embrace
The waist of a giggling maid
As she runs on the sand of
the Arctic strand,
Where the ice-bear's
bones are laid.

Oh, we are the Innuit people,
Content in our northern
home;
While the kayak's prow cuts
the curling brow
Of the breaker's snowy foam.
The merry Innuit people,
Of the cold, grey Arctic sea,
Where the breaching whale, the aurora pale
And the snow-white foxes be.

PORT CLARENCE, ALASKA,
July 13, 1899.